Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity

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Music analysis and rap music

I am proposing here a poetics of music, addressing an intended audience of scholars of popular music and cultural studies, and music scholars generally, including those engaged with progressive musicology. In doing so, I confront a considerable historical burden and some formidable disciplinary obstacles. "Close reading" of music, here, means interpretation based on some conception of the musical piece as an object; and such a practice has become somewhat suspect in both musicology and popular music studies, although in the case of the former its problematic status is less entrenched. The field of popular music scholarship presents a more formidable challenge; those affiliated with fields such as communications, cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology, to name just a few, often voice suspicion about close reading of music under the rubric of the term "musicological." Musicologists, on the other hand, often identify analysis with the rival discipline of music theory and have voiced some salient critiques over the past few years (countered by some, frankly, poorly informed conservative responses from music theorists).²

Musicological critiques of music theory and analysis have been launched by, among others and from quite different perspectives, Tomlinson (1993a), McClary (1985), Cusick (1994), and Kingsbury (1991).³ In the case of popular music, music analysis is particularly suspect not only for eliding institutional facts and often avoiding questions of social relevance, but also for sidestepping the possibility that audiences might shape their own responses to music, challenging and reinscribing its cultural force and significance.⁴ To such championing of audience activity – understandable, in the still powerful wake of Adorno – one could, of course, counterpose David

¹ Some of the limits to music analysis from the standpoint of communications theory are summarized in Manuel (1993), pp. 15–17.

² I discuss some of those responses in Krims (1998b).

³ Reciprocated suspicion from, if not officially a music theorist, then certainly a scholar strongly upholding the standards of technical analysis can be seen in Agawu (1993).

⁴ Chambers (1994) makes this point with particular force, arguing that audiences may inflect and revise meanings of musical (among other) texts.

Morley's (1993) important distinction in scale between audiences' abilities to inflect texts, on the one hand, and the culture industries' ability to encode texts, on the other. Whatever one thinks of the power of audiences to inflect music, the doubts "in the air" concerning music analysis are powerful and inevitable.

Some of the assertions about contemporary music theory coming from musicology may seem dismissive and do at times caricature music analysis, especially when the latter has been beginning to recognize some of its former blindnesses and take steps, however halting and clumsy, toward addressing them. Nevertheless, suspicions of close reading are a disciplinary fact that must be faced, and they form a considerable historical burden to those who venture to propose a musical poetics. Furthermore, many of the critiques must be accepted as perfectly valid and met seriously with something other than dismissal, angry denial, or silence.

My basic argument here is that cultural studies (and cultural studies-influenced work in communications, media studies, and other fields) needs to reexamine its very understandable suspicion of close reading of music. Furthermore, I will analogously claim that the suspicion of music theory in some recent musicology, although well placed in view of the history of the former discipline, does not diminish the need to come to terms with music analysis and what will be called here "musical poetics."

Popular music studies against analysis

Popular music studies does not have a disciplinary center - e.g., widespread departments of popular music studies - and thus, it is always dangerous to speak of central disciplinary contentions in the field. Rather, the mix of scholars from communications, comparative literature, musicology (and music theory), Afro-American studies, area studies, English, sociology, and so many other established (or quasi-established) disciplines combines to make popular music studies an ever-shifting, irreducibly diverse ensemble of viewpoints and practices. It is difficult not to savor this environment, in which one may open a journal or book, or attend a conference, with a high degree of confidence that one is about to witness an interdisciplinary discussion, a set of multiple approaches, models, and constructions of the object. The flipside, of course, is that one always risks overgeneralization when summarizing the objections to close reading. Nevertheless, there are some pronounced enough tendencies to venture a few words.

The notion is widespread in popular music studies that analyzing popular music in the "musicological" sense distances one from the

real engagements of both artists and audiences, both of whom presumably do not relate to any significant extent to the music as modeled (e.g., McClary and Walser 1990 - voiced by two musicologists, and thus perhaps implying a certain unfairness in the negative weight to the word "musicological"). A fairly narrow (though important) set of objections to technical analysis of popular music has to do with the inappropriate predominance of pitched parameters (especially harmony and melody), a predominance held over from the analysis of classical music (e.g., McClary and Walser 1990). Such criticisms are salient, especially given the importance of timbre, gesture, rhythm, and texture, in many people's reception of various popular musics. On the other hand, such problems are not insurmountable, as, for instance, Robert Walser (1993 and 1995) has demonstrated. The lesson to be learned here is the importance of delineating carefully what one considers the parameters relevant for consideration – a decision that will often be highly context-specific by genre - and of specifying (and supporting with evidence from the relevant parties) the culturally salient reason for doing so.

But there are also more fundamental objections to music analysis in popular contexts. The field is often the province of ethnomusicologists, or even more often (in North America) pursued in departments of communications or cultural studies (among many other possibilities); and in those disciplinary contexts, "close reading" has not always enjoyed canonical status.⁵ Peter Manuel's view may be taken as representative:

An analysis of popular music which concentrates only on the phenomena of composition and studio performance thus runs the risk of distorting reality by means of a sentimental and nostalgic reification of creative processes which are of secondary importance in media production as a whole.

(Manuel 1993, p. 16)

And such is the aesthetic orientation of mainstream music analysis in general (and in particular its self-relating, structuralist procedures) that even an analysis which does *not* focus "only on the phenomena of composition and studio performance" may also run into similar problems. Manuel's statement accurately poses a problem, and it does so without reproducing the more puzzling adjective "idealist," which is often predicated of music analysis without (as far as I know) any explication of its relation to the more properly philosophical term "idealism." Reification, then, may be taken as a serious challenge.

One basis for the challenge to popular musical close reading is the

⁵ Exceptionally, Covach and Boone (1997) present essays mainly by music theorists on popular musics.

claim that musicological analyses tend not to leave room for audience inflection. The argument asserts that such analyses treat the music as if it were some self-existent object whose meaning and social function can be determined outside creative and diverse responses of communities, subcultures, and the like. Furthermore, they ignore that what we sometimes treat as static texts might in fact be sites of negotiation that bear multiple social inscriptions (e.g., Lipsitz 1994). This critique is particularly prominent in communication studies.

Such objections are, in fact, excellent arguments for audience studies, and it should be borne in mind that some of the contentions of this book should benefit greatly from thoroughgoing ethnographic studies of audiences and their own constructions of musical content.⁶ In the meantime, discussions of genres and songs in this book indicate, at various points, places that audiences have interpreted the music, and ways in which audience investment has made its way into sound, word, and image. In addition, the discussions of genres and songs are already multiple inscriptions and always in historical and geographic motion: they result from the constant feedback loop which implicates the music industry and its clientele (both artists and purchasers) in constant negotiation and development.

Other critiques of close reading from popular music studies overlap significantly with those from musicology and therefore will be elaborated in the following section. At the same time, it would be an exaggeration to say that music analysis is fully disreputable in popular music studies. Moore (1993) makes a forceful argument for the importance of rock analysis, and although his argument is not in all quarters (and disciplines) accepted, it stands as signs that music analysis occupies some discursive space. John Shepherd (1991) maintains the usefulness of music analysis as one parameter of understanding how music works in culture. Richard Middleton (1990) allows for musical structure as one of many possible levels of musical signification. And although not engaging music analysis himself, Simon Frith does suggest that sociological studies of rock and pop tend to underestimate the importance of sound (e.g., Frith 1983, p. 13 - cited in Shuker 1998, p. 208). Such studies, though important, remain in the minority.

Musicology against analysis

In musicology, as in popular music studies, it would also be an exaggeration to claim that music analysis universally bears the brunt

⁶ Keyes (1996) performs such an ethnography for several African-American communities, for example.

of heavy suspicion. Even in the so-called "New Musicology," there are examples of simultaneous engagements of both postmodern theory and music analysis; it is useful to recall, for example, that arguably the first major monograph of "New Musicology," Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings* (1991), is itself replete with arguments culled partially from music-analytical observations.⁷

Nonetheless, some serious critiques of music theory as a discipline and music analysis as a practice have appeared in musicological work in recent years, and they are very much worth considering. One may find music theory reproached as "essentializing" (Cusick 1991) and "pseudo-scientific" (McClary 1985), and one may also find close reading charged as "pull[ing] us back toward the aestheticism and transcendentalism of earlier ideologies" (Tomlinson 1993a). Indeed, it is difficult to peruse any mainstream music theory journal without getting the impression that, while overstated at times, such characterizations are often true.⁸

Critiques of close reading in musicology (i.e., in the context of "Western classical" music) are rather similar to those in popular music studies; but musicological critiques tend to focus more explicitly on the technical and scientifistic features of post-1950s music theory (as in the McClary 1985 essay just quoted). The difference in emphasis may well stem, in part, from the greater tendency in the discipline of music theory proper (which, let us recall, tends largely to confine itself to "Western classical" music⁹) to develop far more elaborately technical analyses (and theoretical systems) than those generally deemed "musicological" in popular music scholarship. Music theory looks different from there.

But equally relevant to the differently flavored critiques from within musicology of musical close reading is the relative novelty of requiring that classical music scholarship yield an ultimate social significance. That is to say, it is largely through the so-called "New Musicology" that the world of "the social" has entered the problematic in full force, enabling criteria of cultural and political relevance and function now to be applied (at least for certain

⁷ In fact, a small tradition of feminist music-analytical work continues today, involving scholars such as Suzanne Cusick, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, and Ellie Hisama, to name just a few.

⁸ Tomlinson's wording about "earlier ideologies" foregrounds an unhelpful aspect of many discussions about music theory, namely the tendency in much postmodern theory to assume a position *beyond* a certain historical/ideological point, from which perspective the labeling of "earlier ideologies" then becomes virtually a *de facto* critique – a disturbingly ahistoricist perspective.

⁹ Exceptions include Covach and Boone (1997), and the various publications of Walter Everett on the music of the Beatles.

audiences) to judgments of scholarship.¹⁰ Thus, the benchmark of cultural salience is not by any means a habit in the minds of all musicologists (unless one refers to "culture" in the older sense of cultivating the spirit). Yet that benchmark has been in force, to some extent, in popular music scholarship almost from the beginning. Hence, critiques of close reading in the latter discipline tend to rely more heavily on cultural-theoretical arguments, while those from musicology only at times do so.¹¹ Furthermore (and I would say, revealingly), specifically literary forms of post-structuralist theory have been more influential in "New Musicology" than they have been in popular music studies (which is not to say that there has been no literary-theoretical influence in the latter). 12 Thus, issues like pleasure and sexuality, along with manners of speaking culled to a large extent from French traditions, predominate more in the scholarship of classical, than of popular, music. The constellation of literary approaches, in turn, may at times, particularly in the case of musicology, instill habits of internalist interpretation more amenable to musictheoretical close reading.

In any case, much "hardcore" music theory and analysis, with its heavy reliance on the salience of "purely" musical relationships and experiences, fares rather poorly by standards of cultural-theoretical understanding. And, as new and at times literary as postmodern theory may be in "New Musicology," it may be said that the critiques of music analysis in musicology and studies of popular music overlap to a very significant extent. What is at stake in both, from the perspective of the present discussion, is the purpose of musical poetics, and its relation to social structures and actions.

Musicological critiques of close reading usefully identify a lineage of such musical aesthetics (via such figures as Schopenhauer, Schiller, and Hanslick) which survives without proper names, and with terms like "structure" and "coherence" as the cornerstone of a history replete with the ideology of the artwork and aesthetic transcendence.¹³ Such a lineage, inextricable from the intellectual foundations of musicology, buttresses, in the case of Anglo-American music theory, an elaborated discipline whose emulation of scientific

¹⁰ Krims (1998a) explores, from another angle, the problem of "the social" in music scholarship.

Even Gary Tomlinson (1993), one of the musicologists most explicitly influenced by Foucault and thus, one might assume, most likely to engage arguments about political consequences of "close reading," instead sticks fairly closely to a postmodern epistemological point about reinscription of the "artwork" assumption.

¹² In Krims (1998a), I discuss at greater length the delights and dangers of literary theory (especially deconstruction) in musicology and music theory.

Lippman (1992) gives an overview of post-Kantian musical aesthetics; Norris (1988), pp. 28–31, summarizes some of the major relevant developments.

and mathematical models virtually invites the resistance of humanities academics. But dismissing music theory, like dismissing any discipline, is too simple and undialectical a gesture to be acceptable to those who take history, and its ideological twists and turns, seriously.

In particular, such a dismissal would seem to miss the dialectical moment in history represented in the disciplinary development of music theory; in the 1950s the discipline in the United States underwent a turn whose direction may partially determine the current status of close reading. ¹⁴ Specifically, the drive in the era of American universities toward the correlation of scientific knowledge and industrial "progress"; the concomitant model of science as a mode of validation for university disciplines; the elaboration of music analysis as the source of precision and controlled complexity in music studies – all of these developments render music theory, in its current mainstream incarnation, not an object of scorn, but rather a rich source of historical knowledge, a living specimen of an era widely believed to have disappeared in the postmodern age but nevertheless very much with us.

Current critiques of music theory would gain from historicizing the current climate, in which music theory sometimes feels so odd; and film studies (to which we will return at greater length later) may serve as a contrasting example of how a field's *reception* of close reading *may itself be historically conditioned*. That is to say, the question to be asked here of musical formalism is not how it is that we can get over or around it, but rather how it is that it has come to play the role that it has in musical discourse. And there, the divergent development of academic theory in music and film can be marshaled to make the point that close reading is neither intrinsically mystifying nor intrinsically demystifying. Instead, the particular development of close reading in a particular disciplinary climate may influence our own retrospective assessments of it.

Film studies serves as an excellent counterpoise to music scholarship *qua* cultural studies, since film theory has developed, since the 1960s, its own tradition of close reading.

But a signal motivation of film-studies poetics, especially since the advent of efforts such as Mulvey (1975), has been the location of ideology in the construction of film. In Mulvey's case, for example, the construction of the gaze is precisely an effect of how the film is assembled, so that explaining just *how* that gaze is produced will have the effect of ideological demystification. In comparison to film studies'

¹⁴ McCreless (1997) gives a valuable summary of the development of music theory as a discipline in the United States, beginning in the 1950s.

close reading, earlier *auteur* theory, with its emphasis on personal style as the origin of aesthetic effects, takes on the appearance of sheer art appreciation, the very avoidance of social engagement. So the advent of a tradition of reading poetics in film scholarship represented, among other things, a coming into focus of ideology within what had previously been constructed as an artwork.

Such could not be said of music theory and its traditions of close reading, in which demystification and the location of ideology are far from standard projects. On the contrary, as we have seen, close reading in music theory falls prey to the charge of aestheticizing music and closing off avenues of ideological investigation. So whereas the advent of contemporary film close reading is widely received as a demystifying development, close reading in music theory enjoys no such prestige. The contrast might raise the question: is the practice of close reading mystifying or is it demystifying? Is it conducive to ideological critique, or is it an obstacle? The questions are abstract and hollow, because they fail to take into account that the ideological function of each discipline's poetics are residues of their specific histories, and of the situations in which close reading found its disciplinary location.

Other, often related, contrasts between film studies and music studies can be cited in their histories. The former languished for a long time without academic recognition and, in addition, has always lent itself rather readily to theories of representation; while music, by contrast, has long enjoyed academic prestige as an established discipline designed precisely to remove it from the field of representation. The point of observing such contrasts is that the value of close reading cannot be discussed as anything other than a position concerning history itself, and that the mere engagement of a poetics is not inherently progressive or regressive, mystifying or demystifying. A judgment about music analysis is a judgment about the result of a particular and contingent set of circumstances and developments. And just as the aestheticizing and mystifying function of much Anglo-American music theory had a birth only possible at a certain unique point in time, so may it have a death at another unique point. Thus, whatever the accuracy of reproaches to music analysis, such reproaches do not by any means exclude the value of music analysis categorically. Later in this chapter, film theory will once again come into focus in a more extended way; for now, an underlining of the historical contingency to musical close reading's poor reputation in some guarters should be the first offshoot of the comparison. From the standpoint of late 1990s musical academia, we may appreciate how possibilities of social engagement were lost to the emulation of Cold War era intellectualism.

From music theory's past into its future

Once music theory's dysfunctions are conceived historically, the gap between music theory's current and stunningly elaborated forms, on the one hand, and the postmodern ethos predominant in "New Musicology," on the other, does not simply speak to music theory's need to "get with the times" and become postmodern. True, postmodern epistemological and metaphysical critiques would certainly be a useful addition to music theory. But unless we have no interest in knowing histories, even histories we do not like or enjoy, it might be more productive to observe music theory than to condemn it, and even perhaps to relish the trace of Cold War science it presents to us in astonishingly pristine condition.

But conceiving the historical emergence of music theory as a discipline is only half the equation; the other half is to ask why the discipline, throughout the last few decades, has been so resistant to paradigm change. For whereas the sciences (after which music theory often patterns itself) have been able to retain their methodologies while remaining industrially productive, humanities disciplines such as English have diverged, developing theories more conducive to post-Fordist production and culture. 16 Meanwhile, music theory, perhaps because of the exclusivity of its music-educated clientele and perhaps because of its still tenacious links to composition, has remained in, and developed to a breathtaking level, the models of precision and controlled, confined elaboration that now retain little prestige in the humanities. ¹⁷ The historical lapse, then, between music theory and the humanities as the whole, rather than simply being portrayed in moralizing terms, could perhaps more valuably be seen as a living legacy of a social vision that now seems quaint (seen from the perspective of cultural theory). For those more sympathetic to music theory, its 1950s social vision (or blindness) may seem, on the

¹⁵ In Krims (1998b), I elaborate how this might be possible.

[&]quot;Post-Fordist" refers to the kinds of commodity and service production that have prevailed in industrialized countries since the advent of technologies such as computerization, high-speed and versatile communications, and container shipping. Geographers such as Harvey (1989) have attributed to such technologies fundamental changes in commodity production, for example, the ability to produce on short order and to sophisticated design specification. Such methods of production are "post-Fordist" in the sense of succeeding the older assembly-line methods pioneered by Henry Ford. Furthermore, and more suggestively for the present context, Harvey refers many aspects of postmodern theory to the time/space compression and spatial world order created by post-Fordist production. A good overview of theories of post-Fordism can be found in Amin (1994).

Music theory's role in providing vocational training to composers has undoubtedly affected its procedural development, as has its contribution to "musicianship."

contrary, an obvious advantage, seen from a more popularized perspective; from that perspective, capital's immense global expansion in the last two decades or so implies the never-ending progress of science and individual freedom and virtue. For such advocates, the left-leaning (albeit more reformist than revolutionary) critique pervasive in the humanities is a mere muffled voice in the worldwide triumph of capital.

The substantial (and growing) subfield of cognitive science in music theory, and the energetic application of mathematical models retain an unmistakable connection with Cold War conceptions of academic knowledge. On the other hand, a more humanistic face of music theory (represented by scholars such as Carl Schachter, Scott Burnham, and Daniel Harrison) serves as a reminder of the humanities in that era, the age when New Criticism promised a redemption of the spirit from the domination of a greatly expanding capitalist instrumentality. Music theory, in other words, perpetuates, in a way otherwise impossible to reproduce, a dialectic - namely, of instrumental reason and of its spiritualized refusal - whose untimeliness promises a rare glimpse of humanities from an earlier era relatively unchanged and intact. When one can grasp the opportunity to glimpse a disciplinary field from the time of New Criticism and to compare it with the greatly changed disciplines of the present, does that not render all the greater an error any attempt simply to dismiss it? From that perspective, music theory as a discipline offers a history lesson, not a proper object of scorn.

The conception of music theory suggested here is, in my view, a more productive angle on the more common New Musicological critiques of music theory, which, relying as they do on feminist or post-Foucauldian theory, emphasize music theory's failure to meet contemporary standards of social engagement. While music theory may for the most part be missing that boat, simply to conceive it that way forgoes the opportunity to see both music theory and musicology as imbricated together in a contemporary dynamic. For both disciplines can be seen as symptoms of the growing autonomy of both a postmodern culture (and theory), and also a post-Fordist regime in which scientifistic methods, and science itself, are seen as "beyond ideology." Our overlooking music theory's potential as a historical trace, including for perspectives on musicology, may also be attributed to our overemphasizing the similarity between musicology and music theory, namely their dedication to the model of the artwork.¹⁸ Although that similarity is certainly significant, it misses

¹⁸ In this sense, the labeling, in popular music studies, of analytic approaches as "musicological," though understandable, may be slightly off base.

the equally salient point that music theory never completely followed musicology into the realm of *humanistic* study, remaining instead in a (perhaps unique) cusp of the humanities and something between "hard" science and vocational training for composers. Otherwise put, music theory has retained its 1950s dialectic of the instrumental logic of industrial capital, ¹⁹ along with the humanistic critique of that logic that located spirituality in a conception of autonomous art. Understanding music theory as an unusually, and even valuably, frozen dialectic may lead to a further understanding of how it, as a discipline, never quite having followed musicology into full humanism, has found it so far correspondingly difficult to follow the New Musicology into post-humanism.²⁰

Music theory and musical poetics

Grasping the significance of the 1950s climate in which "music theory" came about may also serve to introduce another distinction, namely one between music theory, in its current institutional form, and musical poetics, as it will be advocated here. And this book aims, first, to broaden vastly the scope of the term "music theory" to mean simply theory (including cultural and social theory) about music. And second, the book proposes to rename what is now called "music theory" - specifically, the designing of models of intramusical relations and analysis of particular pieces - as "musical poetics." The terminological modifications would allow "music theory" a much broader domain, while still retaining, as a sub-field, the possibility for music analysis and elaboration of aesthetics, styles, genres, and so on. Furthermore, and more important, the broadening of the term "music theory" and the redesignation of "musical poetics" would clarify the latter as merely one subset of the former, engaged explicitly with the question of how music works in cultures.

Thus, redefining "music theory" as "theory about music" would not be a mere nominalist (or idealist) ploy. Rather, given the scope of "theory" in the humanities, such a redefinition could offer the benefit of allowing music analysis to suggest the world of cultural theory itself. Imagining such adjustments in disciplinary practice will be facilitated by keeping in mind fields such as film theory, in which the

¹⁹ The time of music theory's disciplinary establishment was a period in which many university disciplines were explicitly being modeled as sciences to support the post-World War II industrial expansion.

²⁰ Some exceptions are collected in Krims (1998c) and Schwarz (1997). Some publications of Kevin Korsyn and Brian Hyer also merit mention in this regard; in a different category entirely is the Marxist music theory of Henry Klumpenhouwer, especially Klumpenhouwer (1998).

engagement of a certain poetics is not at all disreputable. In fact, doing so might serve as a reminder that music is, in a sense, the historical oddball. For "music theory" as practiced now is, by and large, coextensive with what here is being called "musical poetics," whereas what is called "theory" in most other areas of the humanities tends to embrace the more recent models of "theory" following the semiotic (and post-structuralist) revolution in the humanities. In other words, the scope of the term "music theory" proposed here is already assumed in the case of film (not to mention close reading in disciplines such as English). In the meantime, the field of musical poetics is already elaborated by what is now called "music theory," although it is a separate question how much of current music theory one would want to deem useful to the project of mapping the social place of music. It would certainly be senseless to deny the relevance of all current music theory; that denial would be no better than a blind counter-reaction, disposing of some work that may indeed bear information on culturally significant phenomena and processes. Indeed, it would seem problematic to maintain that we may safely dismiss music theory as "false consciousness" and presume that music exists apart from its constituent theorizing. Such a position would itself hardly take into account Marxist and postmodern lessons about the discursive constitutions of artistic production and reception. Careful (and methodologically informed) explorations of music theory are necessary to understand the social constitution of "music," and to see the multiple ways in which that constitution plays into wider circuits of power. Even musicological (postmodern) critiques of music theory suggest that whatever kind of practice "music" is in Western society, it performs certain social functions.²¹ In that case, some poetics is necessary: if cultural life is to be mapped, then it is important to recognize that representation (in its broader meaning within critical theory) is not simply a "what," but also a "how." In the case of music, it is difficult to deny that the "how" involves, at least, the particular arrangements of sound. To assert that talk about "structure," "form," "unity," and the like is "just discourse" is to miss the point: regardless of whether such terms have "real referents," social action is profoundly affected by them. And it is for this very reason that bracketing musical poetics risks ignoring social processes by which musical actors (performers, composers, producers, and so on) model, invoke, play against, or in some other ways make use of musico-poetic discourse. Setting aside musical poetics would be no less a mystification than the more traditional

²¹ This, in fact, is one of Tomlinson's (1993) most salient points. Kingsbury (1988) and (1991) shows how the notion of "music" functions in a conservatory setting.

practice of treating musical poetics as socially isolated or autonomous. In both cases, the text/context dichotomy remains deeply inscribed in our conceptions of music, hypostatizing both text *and* context.

Musical poetics, then, conceived as I suggest here, may be recognized as simultaneously crucial to (a broadened) music theory and incomplete without what other "theories" in the humanities must encounter at some point, namely the twin problematics of culture and representation. Once one has encountered those problematics, it becomes especially clear that forming, engaging, and judging musical poetics can never be a complete process without more generalized theories of societies, ethnicities, histories – in short, those things to which music analysis has often resolutely refused to direct its attention.

Some important consequences follow from the terminological (and methodological) changes I propose here. If one accepts some of the "New Musicological" critiques of music analysis, then it follows that music theory and analysis, in their current institutional state in North America and the United Kingdom, err in stipulating musical "structure" for the sake of aesthetic consumption. Here, the word "aesthetic" is meant in the strictly Kantian sense of invoking the value of disinterested pleasure and the free-play of the faculties.²² It is thus not coterminous with questions of pleasure, "leisure," and other problematics that may well lead into social engagement.

Music theory, within the redefinition proposed here, could offer, given sufficient elaboration, a formidable response to musicological critiques. At the same time, critiques coming from popular music studies, involving the distance of music analysis from either performers' or listeners' realities (not to mention institutional ones), are not necessarily salient, if music theory may be taken to encompass problematics from communications theory, cultural studies, ethnomusicology and the other disciplines forming popular music studies.

Conversely, some kind of musical poetics would have to form an indispensable part of music theory. For the project of this book extends beyond the mere assimilation of music theory to cultural theory, to argue specifically that musical organization must be taken seriously, precisely because artists, the music industry, and audiences of popular music take it seriously. That is to say, there is evidence all about that the cultural force of popular music sought by theorizing on the topic lies, in part, in artists', audiences', and institutions' investment

The phrase "free-play" here hints at something elaborated in Krims (1998a), namely the possibility that the slowly increasing vogue for deconstruction in music theory and analysis may in fact simply be reinforcing existing disciplinary practices.

in kinds of sounds, in distinctions among sounds, and in events of particular genres and songs. Such evidence can be culled from discussions one may have with consumers of popular music, in public statements and advertisements of artists and record companies that cue musico-poetic aspects of music, and in discussions with artists concerning their notions of their audiences and (sub)cultural location. Now, the variability of the investment in musico-poetic processes may well explain in part why the specificity of sound is so often sidelined in cultural studies of popular music. And indeed, the visual cues and verbal discourse to which most cultural theory is directed rarely provide significant clues about the functions of sound and musical process.

But the last point – the disciplinary orientation of cultural studies to verbal and, secondarily, visual discourses – is precisely the reason that a parallel, and, I would argue, equally significant body of cultural theorizing should base itself on the musical (i.e., aural) poetics of popular music. This would not, by any means, be to sanctify the "musical" as somehow an interpretive bottom line displacing other points of interpretive entry, with disingenuous arguments that we are, after all, talking about music; rather, it would be to place musical poetics – i.e., the discussion of musical design – in a place parallel to, and always bearing a complex relation to, other aspects of the social imbrications and functions of popular music. Admittedly, in the pages that follow, analytical attention will be focused more on musical texts and producers than on audience studies to make that point; and audience studies concerning musical poetics would form an important counterpart to the discussions in this book. But at the same time, the dynamics of producer, media content, and consumer are never discrete, and at least in the case of rap music, the media investment in musico-poetic features of the music cannot occur in isolation from a responsive audience and often changes in response to audience articulations. Just how that audience responds to (and inflects) the media content is a project whose exploration may well await more ethnographic work.

An argument running parallel to all this is that audiences often listen in more sophisticated ways, and *invest* more in that elaborated listening, than one might infer from those critiques that accuse music analysis of representing an unpalatably high act of abstraction. On the contrary, my own observations reinforce Simon Frith's (1996) notion that fan culture often involves sophisticated and genre-specific judgments little recognized in academic literature. The question of just *how* to engage those judgments, on the other hand, is not an easy one. It most likely does not necessarily involve the pitch-structuralist systems that inform many "musicological" analyses of popular

musics, such as those presented in Covach and Boone (1997).²³ Instead, the analyses in this book take, as a starting point, remarks by, and what seem to be the concerns of, artists, institutions, and audiences, whose views on aesthetic issues in rap music often correlate extremely closely. Thus, rather than concerning oneself with notions like "middleground *Zugs*" or particular re-harmonizations of melodies, close readings of rap music might engage an effort to model what makes a given genre (or song, or artist) "hard" or "hardcore," or how it is that a song might project "Brooklyn-ness" (or, as discussed in Chapter 4, "Southernness"). It is precisely terms such as these that form part of the consciousnesses and cultural engagements of those that produce and consume the music. And, equally important, those same terms are invested directly in types of sound.

As an illustration, Rakim Allah (formerly of Eric B. and Rakim) explains in a 1997 interview what he means by "hardness" in rap music:

"Hard," to me, is a sound. This is music, you know what I mean? It ain't about chewing on nails, swallowing glass, screw face in the cameras and knocking 'em. It's not about that, you know what I'm saying. Being this is music, we express the hardness through sound: delivery, bass kicks, the mood of the tracks or the samples that we chose. That's what hard hip-hop is to me, you know what I'm saying.

(Allah 1997)

Given the validatory status the word "hard" has in hip-hop discourse, it would seem sheer folly not to see tremendous force in questions of musical style and organization involving "hardness" in rap music. Nor will it do to dismiss Rakim's words as "simply" publicity-oriented or as inauthentic (or insincere) because media-directed. On the contrary, that Rakim elucidates his own musical poetics of "hardness" for public consumption should suffice to indicate that questions of sonic organization permeate the circuit of producers and consumers. Or, to use language more current to cultural studies, the music, and Rakim's discussion of it, becomes a site of negotiation for musico-poetic definitions of hardness.

Music, musical closure, and film theory

Rakim's commentary (and many others like it) suggest that some poetics is necessary to understand the cultural force of music, no matter what problems music theory may have developed as a disci-

²³ This is not to say that artists and fans are inattentive to parameters of pitch, or even to pitch-structural judgments. The degree to which fans focus on pitch probably varies greatly by audience group and by genre. Hence the analyses of rap music in this book assume a normally greater salience for rhythm and texture.

pline. But something *proper* to music analysis may itself present an obstacle to further cultural study. One of the most common quandaries a socially oriented analyst may encounter is what I will call the *problem of musical closure*. By this phrase, I mean to refer to the fact that the only commonly accepted references of musical features are, for the most part, other musical features.²⁴ Being a notorious dilemma of musical semiotics, the problem of musical closure has, as one of its effects, the music-analytical practice of modeling songs as inwardly (or self-) articulated. The inexorable and exclusive logic of musical explanation thus mounts its own formidable resistance to the analyst interested in music analysis as cultural studies.

Indeed, once some music-structural assertions have been posited, the task of convincingly implicating other levels of social life faces its own daunting obstacles. The closure of interpretive systems – of which it should be clear by now that music is only a particularly intransigent case – is particularly daunting for those who (for whatever, presumably localized, reason) start out with a musico-poetic issue with the intention of opening the discussion into broader cultural processes. This is not only because of the strong resistance music-analytical discourse poses to "external" determinations. It is also because an interest in music as a cultural force tends to carry with it the presumption that either more semantically decipherable discourses (in the case of postmodern cultural theory) or relations of production (in the case of Marxist theory) are more desirable interpretive places to be. So closure in musico-poetic relations does not simply confine the analyst to one domain; it confines the analyst to a domain that is counted as, if not trivial, then somehow damningly preliminary. One has not yet achieved the "material" level – whether by that term one is thinking of the post-Foucauldian materialism of genealogy or of a more properly Marxist historical materialism.

One may easily slip into some form of expressive causality, in which some aspect of social life is seen as somehow "causing" the musical poetics to take a specific form. The music thus ends up either epiphenomenal to, or homologous with, other aspects of culture for reasons left inexplicit. The latter possibility then may slide quickly into idealism.

Another option frequently deployed – inserting an "extra-musical" interpretation at the point of some musico-poetic anomaly, or some other remarkable moment, to which the rest of the musical structure then is subordinated as ground to figure – has the virtue of boosting

²⁴ Undeniably, some conventional references may be posited between musical parameters and, say, certain emotions or ideas. But such references are not generally treated as systematic, or as capable of forming structural elaboration or design in music-analytical contexts.

the analyst out of a methodological aestheticized isolation. But the analyst's choice of "extra-musical" interpretation (from among the many possibilities) then itself secretly becomes a matter of homology. Thus one might want to designate, for example, a jarring pitch-interval as a sign of social conflict, with the hidden premise that some social agency bears an analogous relation to society that the interval in question does to the tonal order. But the apparent interruption of musical argument nevertheless relies on a background of its self-relationality, and the musical object ends up seeming no less isolated than it had initially, related to the rest of culture by metaphor or simile, or in the best case, metonym.

The problem of musical closure is in some ways not much different from the problems of correlating relations of production to cultural practices. ²⁵ And if music theory is to include those two factors in addition to musical poetics, the problematic then becomes (at least) three-leveled. We are then faced with the challenge of finding ways to figure the relations of the production (in which we would include, among many other things, the music industry itself) to the webs of discourse that are more properly the object of much current critical and cultural theory. To model the dynamics of those two levels, we may well accept as at least a provisional principle some form of socalled "relative autonomy," while at the same time recognizing that the oxymoron of the term itself betrays its status as a problem, rather than a solution.²⁶ In the meantime, a third factor enters the equation, though eventually we will want to collapse it into the discursive level; namely, the world of musical poetics, in which music appears to be arranged, to quote Martin Stokes (1994), in

a patterned context within which ... complex aesthetic vocabularies, or single terms covering a complex semantic terrain point to minute and shifting subtleties of rhythm and texture which make or break the event. (p. 5)

Thus, the close relation of the "event" to an aesthetic vocabulary, with its attendant relative autonomy, militates that the aesthetic (or, to use the present terminology, "poetic") language be taken seriously, if only as a moment of interpretation among many others. Therefore, although one of my principal arguments here is that musical poetics need not be conceived as anything other than a specialized case of representation, for the time being it will be useful to keep it separate and think through its relation to discourse in general.

²⁵ Here, I purposely avoid the terms "base" and "superstructure" in order to avoid implicating my discussion in widespread misrepresentations, in postmodern theory, of the meaning of those terms.

²⁶ Garofalo (1987) works through some of the problem of relative autonomy in relation to popular music.

Rap music and the poetics of identity

If the dilemma of musical poetics seems to be its own inexorable momentum toward closure, and if that momentum seems inevitable in the face of well-intentioned attempts to avoid it, then we may nevertheless take heart from the fact that musical poetics may not be alone in this respect. Thus, we might want to approach once more the problem of musical closure from perspectives afforded in other situations. We might look specifically for cases in which a social practice might instantiate some poetics of its own, while it simultaneously remains conspicuously involved in ideology and social formation. Film offers precisely the desired circumstances, and it also has the signal advantage of an allied academic field - film theory – in which discourses both of poetics (i.e., the "how" of film representation) and of social relations are well articulated. (Indeed, the compatibility, even interdependence, of poetic and ideological theory has often been assumed in film studies, as I will discuss presently.)

This is not to say that film poetics has never been at odds with other aspects of film theory; on the contrary, the practices of focusing either on poetics or on technology have indeed generated tension and debate in the field. Fredric Jameson, in his (1990) essay "The Existence of Italy," offers the occasion to think film poetics and technology in a way that will bear directly on the problem of musical poetics. Jameson opposes what he regards as the more strictly "theoretical" discourses about film to technological explanation.²⁷ The latter involves such "interventions," to borrow his term, as explaining the composition of shots, formerly attributed to some aesthetic principle, as a result of a material necessity of the then current state of film stock. In other words, where an intrinsic poetics had formerly seemed to prevail, a brute contingency of material life now rudely intervenes. The technological register, for Jameson, tends to work best as "demystification, generally in the service a materialist of philosophical position ... [It] comes as the therapeutic revelation of an outside to the work itself ... suddenly show[ing] up the shabby idealistic pretenses of an older intrinsic criticism" (p. 178; emphasis Jameson's).²⁸ The moment when technology intervenes demonstrates

²⁷ In the following discussion of Jameson's essay, page-numbers only will appear in the text, all referring to Jameson (1990). The word "theoretical" also appears in quotation marks in Jameson's text, indicating, one might assume, that he does not mean to imply that technological explanation somehow escapes the category of theory. Indeed, his discussion makes clear that "the technological" turns out to constitute its own theoretical realm.

²⁸ It might be proposed that some recent musicological critiques of music theory (in the narrower, currently institutional sense of the term) are themselves attempts to point up a similar idealistic pretense to the intrinsic criticism known as music analysis.

that the intrinsic (or poetic) interpretation had "drawn [the material condition] inside the text and endowed [it] with meaning of a more properly aesthetic kind" – a forced shift of perspective that can be "pitiful and humiliating" (p. 178).

The technological fact, however,

does not stop at this moment of demystification and intervention; it leads on into a new kind of discourse in its own right (which can be called technological determinism for shorthand purposes) ... [And that discourse] will now begin to reproduce all the dilemmas generated by the history of forms, and very specifically that of the opposition between the intrinsic and the extrinsic ... (p. 179)

The technological discourse, then, will eventually outline the very same (and equally idealist) closed system. At the point where such a process seems in danger of imposing itself, further interventions would be needed, be they once again from the "theoretical" register, or perhaps from some register not yet appearing in the process. In the case of film, mutations in audience and/or class structure, or new institutional modes of function in the industry might impose themselves as explanations, while surely the oft-observed new horizontal organization of global-culture industries in general might intervene at some point, at least for recent contexts.²⁹ What is being traced here is not at all a paradox, but rather the tendency of modes of analysis to totalize the field of objects (or systems) under study, together with the concomitant need to show the sublime and shocking "outside" to whatever enveloping modes of thought one develops.³⁰

Jameson's discussion is particularly useful because musical poetics poses (possibly even more forcefully) the same daunting challenge as film poetics: it imposes an almost irresistible force toward closure, toward insisting, in a sense by its own momentum, on explanations within its own systematic context for problems that had initially been posed there. In other words, questions of film-aesthetic provenance tend to insist on locating their answers in film aesthetics, and similarly for film-technological questions, while questions of music-structural provenance tend to lock the interlocutor into answers about musical structure.³¹

²⁹ Burnett (1996) describes horizontal organization in the case of popular musics.

This is quite a ways, of course, from rejecting all totalizing categorically; instead, one might avoid a premature totalizing of an isolated explanatory level, which would have the effect of closing down investigation. Such distinctions should not be equated with the unfortunate tendency, particularly in much postmodern theory, to use the word "totalizing," often in an uninformed way, as an index to denigrating Marxist modes of thought.

³¹ In retrospect, it would have been useful to emphasize this dilemma in my (1994) discussion of Joseph Straus's adoption of Harold Bloom's theories. It is central to Krims (1998a).

Rap music and the poetics of identity

Now, the particular opposition in the case of music has not always tended to be poetics (or "theory") versus technology.³² There is no reason it could not have been precisely that opposition in the case of popular music studies. But just as often there, and far more often in the case of "art" music, the oppositions have been between poetics and some other register, such as discourse, institutional configuration, or perhaps some conceptions more specific to music studies, like the cultural formation surrounding rock.³³ But the specific discourse of the technological is less important to this scenario than the opposition at which Jameson arrives in the last quoted phrase, between the "intrinsic and the extrinsic." The dynamic that film studies and music studies share is the tendency of a strategic and localized intervention in one realm to become hypostatized, to perpetuate its logic in a deterministic way contrary to the spirit of its initial demystifying function. Technology in film theory may easily stand for "society," "culture," "gender," or even "resistance," as much as it may for musical poetics, or whatever, in music theory. In any case, Jameson's framework would retain its vital relevance.

In the case of music theory, systems of "purely musical" determination – in other words, matters of what is here being called "musical poetics" – threaten the same methodological mystification as "theory" had in the case of film, reinforced still more strongly by discourses of musical autonomy (and its presumed superiority for being autonomous) with which any cultural-theory-oriented music scholar is only too drearily familiar. The intervention of extrinsic determinations (including, perhaps, technology, as in the case of film – an underexplored possibility) may then expose the "shabby idealism" of the musico-poetic analysis. The continued development of determination levels may then pose a counter-image, in which the musico-poetic discourse is itself obscured, and the specificity of that

³² In fact, technological explanation may well be an underexplored option for rethinking some aspects of "art" music history (and preferably in ways that take a broader view of technology than the so-called "historical performance" movement). Chanan (1995) may be a good starting point for beginning such an investigation.

³³ Grossberg (1993), for example, addresses cultural formations of rock, as well as their possible end.

³⁴ Norris (1988), pp. 29–37, gives an interesting philosophical background to the rise of the superiority of music, and the contingency of that superiority on its presumed non-representationality.

³⁵ Here, of course, the parallel to Jameson's film argument breaks down, as, though he does not specify which "theory" he means, it is most likely to some extent "social," in the sense of modeling discourse. That even the posited initial state of film theory needing demystifying should be already socially embedded, whereas the initial state of music theory is not explicitly so, shows how much more urgently something like Jameson's process is called for in music studies.